



Time and Place for Catch & Release

By Ron Wilson

Just when walleye No. 12,027 was getting the hang of catch-and-release fishing, it became shore lunch.

In a little more than a year, walleye No. 12,027 was caught and released by three different anglers, before being hooked, landed and eaten by the fourth. The walleye's account began on April 12, 1999, when the then 10-inch fish was captured by North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries biologists from the Missouri River near Kimball Bottoms as part of a tagging study. Four inches of growth and 13 months later, it ended at the Heart River, a feeder stream of the Big Muddy.

"That fish exemplifies catch-and-release fishing," said Jeff Hendrickson, north central district fisheries supervisor for Game and Fish. "When released properly, it will be there for tomorrow ... for another angler."

Walleye No. 12,027 isn't the exception to catch-and-release fishing, either. The 1999-2001 Missouri River and Lake Oahe tagging study revealed that at least 1 in 4 fish released by one angler was caught later by another.

No Silver Bullet

Catch-and-release fishing in North Dakota today has much to do with how good the fishing is, said Greg Power, Department management/research section supervisor. There was a time when the bite wasn't as good and people returned little, no matter the species, back into the drink. "In our neck of the woods, catch-and-release fishing got its start in the late 1970s with walleye," he said. "Today, catch-and-release fishing is accepted by virtually everyone and practiced by many."

Lauded as a popular conservation practice that can help sustain a quality fishery, releasing what you catch is not always the panacea that some anglers make it out to be. There are instances where it does more harm than good because fish returned are certain to die, but the unknowing angler continues to fish, adding to the toll. "Catch-and-release fishing is a wonderful thing to practice, but there are

situations when it's a negative," Power said.

For instance, releasing coolwater species like walleye in July and August when water temperatures feel bathtub-like is always risky for the fish. "Once water temperatures get to 70 degrees and higher, there is a lot of post-release mortality," Power said. "Even if the fish seems to be doing well when you're handling it, there is a good chance with temperatures that warm the fish won't make it."

Chances of survival, in this and other instances, go down depending on how long you fight the fish, where it's hooked and if it's bleeding. A bleeding fish should be kept for the table because it's going to die. A gut- or badly-hooked fish can survive if water temperatures are cool enough and the fishing line is cut, rather than trying to jerk it free. "The gastric juices in a fish will dissolve a fishhook pretty quickly," Power said.

*Catch and
Release*

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Reel Deep

As a general philosophy, the Department encourages catch-and-release fishing, but only if the situation supports a safe return of fish to water. Fly-anglers are depicted as the quintessential players, and rightfully so, of releasing much of what they catch. Yet, even these conservation-minded participants may need to rethink their routine under some situations.

The fly-rodder who catches and releases dozens of trout an outing during the heat of July and August may be affecting the fishery more than he thinks. "It's a good bet that not every fish caught and released, even on fly equipment, is surviving," Power said. "The person catching and releasing 30-40 trout on a fly rod may have harvested more than their limit allows because of hook mortality."

Fish caught from deep water – 30 feet or deeper – also fall into that category where survival becomes an issue. Devils Lake ice anglers, for instance, commonly catch yellow perch in 40-45 feet, while many walleye and sauger are pulled from similar depths from Lake Sakakawea. The rub, however, is fish caught at those depths will likely not survive because of extreme changes in pressure, causing swim bladders to expand. When this happens, a fish can no longer control its balance in the water column.

"The take home message for people fishing deep is that they should probably keep what they catch," Power said. "Small perch caught deep and released are likely going to die, but the angler continues to fish for bigger fish he wants to take home."

If anglers are simply fishing for recreation and have no interest in keeping anything for the frying pan, they should target fish in shallow water.

Release Tips

Catch-and-release is effective only if released fish are handled carefully. Anglers can do plenty to minimize the chance of the day's catch tipping over:

- Decide to release a fish as soon as it is landed. It is illegal in North Dakota to release a fish once it's been in a livewell or on a stringer.
- Do not play a fish longer than necessary to land it successfully.

Care should be taken in releasing fish back into the water. This catfish is carefully returned to the Red River in eastern North Dakota.

- Bring fish up from deep water slowly so it can adjust to the pressure change.

- Have a fish release tool ready. A needle-nose pliers or similar tool should be used to remove the hook.

- If the fish is hooked deep, cut leader or line close to the mouth. Do not attempt to yank the hook from the gullet.

- If possible, leave the fish in the water while removing the hook.

- Use a landing net only when necessary.

- If the fish must be handled, use a wet glove or wet hand. Most fish species can be held firmly just behind the head.

- Do not hold a fish by the eye sockets. This causes blindness or death.

- Avoid squeezing the fish to protect internal organs.

- Be careful not to damage gills.

- Return fish to water quickly.

- When releasing an exhausted fish, gently cradle it in an upright position and move the fish slowly back and forth in water until it recovers. Watch the fish for a moment to make sure it is fully recovered. If not, resuscitate again.

- If the fish is bleeding heavily, do not release it.

Something Bigger

Catch-and-release fishing is not incorporated in Department fisheries management plans – other than promoting the practice – because fishing pressure on any given water isn't as intense as experienced in other states, Power said. "Someone could argue, however, that catch-and-release could apply to some perch fisheries that receive extreme pressure during the winter," he said.

Then again, it has been included in a way as the Department doesn't allow anglers to high-grade, or keep a fish for awhile and then release it when something bigger comes along. The agency also prohibits catch-and-release fishing tournaments during summer because warm water temperatures – and hours fish spend in livewells – reduce fish survival.

"There is a time and place for catch-and-release," Power said. "However, just because a fish swims away, doesn't mean it's going to survive."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota **OUTDOORS**.

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